

CHEMICAL DEPENDENCY DEFINED

Individuals who are physically and mentally dependent on alcohol and/or illicit or prescription drugs are usually unaware that they have a problem or are in denial about it—despite the damage it does to their health, relationships, career, and other facets of their life. If you think that someone you care about may be “chemically dependent,” you should be prepared to get involved. Recovery from addiction is much more successful and sustained when the affected individual has friends and/or family to provide support, guidance and encouragement. It takes patience, determination and the ability to set limits to help someone recover from and maintain control over addiction.

Chemical dependency is characterized by the repeated use of alcohol and/or drugs in a way that threatens the individual's physical and mental health and well-being as well as the physical safety and emotional well-being of those around him or her. According to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM), the American Psychiatric Association's classification system for psychiatric disorders, a person can be considered dependent if three or more of the following are present:

1. Tolerance to a psychoactive substance
2. Withdrawal signs and symptoms when the substance is withheld
3. Taking the substance in larger amounts or over a longer period of time than was intended (as in the case of prescription pain killers, for example)
4. Unsuccessful efforts to cut down or control substance use.
5. A lot of time spent in activities necessary to obtain the substance
6. Important social, occupational, or recreational activities given up or reduced because of substance use
7. Continued substance use despite having persistent or recurring physical or psychological problems likely to be caused or exacerbated by the substance.

Chemical dependency has behavioral, emotional, physical and other symptoms that vary depending on the affected individual. Answers to some of the following questions may help determine whether suspicions of chemical dependency are warranted:

- Is the person drinking/using the substance more frequently?
- Do you/others feel anxious or scared around the person because of his/her drinking or drug use?
- Does the person's behavior change noticeably when he/she is drinking or using drugs?
- Does the person lie about, or try to hide, justify or make excuses for his/her substance abuse?
- Have you ever been embarrassed by the person's drinking or drug use?
- Has the person forgotten or denied things that happened when he/she was under the influence?
- Have you come across drugs or alcohol that the person has hidden?
- Has the person seemed to stop caring about his/her physical appearance?

TELL-TALE SIGNS OF CHEMICAL DEPENDENCY

Individuals who are chemically dependent physically require the substance to function effectively (they experience withdrawal symptoms in its absence) and are emotionally preoccupied with it. As they become more focused on getting their drug or alcohol of choice, they lose focus on other aspects of their lives. When their life is centered around an addiction, it is impossible for most people to meet their personal, family, career and other obligations.

BREAKING THE DEPENDENCY

Don't expect you'll be able to turn someone around just by caring. Denial is an integral part of the chemical dependency disease process, and people don't change until they accept there's a need for change and are willing to commit to it. Patience, resilience, and the ability to set limits are required. Detox is a necessary first step in recovery because the dependent person's body needs to be weaned from the substance, which entails very unpleasant physical withdrawal symptoms. As such, medical interventions may be suggested to assist in the withdrawal process. Then the individual has to make personal and lifestyle changes. Someone who's chemically dependent is never really cured; there's always the risk of relapse, especially in the beginning. So recovery is really a lifelong process, which means that support and encouragement should be, too.

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